

# Ape expert files lawsuit

Great Ape Trust denies her claim that it is preparing to move bonobos from Des Moines

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An internationally renowned ape-language researcher at Great Ape Trust in Des Moines has accused the lab of abusing an infant bonobo and of preparing to move its apes to another facility.

Bonobo authority Sue Savage-Rumbaugh claimed someone cut both of infant bonobo Teco's heels to prevent him from standing upright, and she suggested in court documents

that all nine apes at the center near Easter Lake are in danger.

She also maintained the trust had gathered equipment and changed the apes' diet in preparation to move them on Thursday. She claims the new board chairman scrapped those plans, however.

The trust flatly denies the allegations leveled by Savage-Rumbaugh.

"There are no plans to move those apes, there never were

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Excerpts from  
Sue Savage-  
Rumbaugh's  
lawsuit  
against the  
Great Ape Trust

Among other things, Dr. Rumbaugh has observed the recent movement on campus of equipment that is designed for the specific purpose of boxing and transporting bonobos in interstate commerce: relocation crates, transport cages and trailers. She also notes that changes to the bonobos' diet and daily regimen have been implemented that are consistent with preparation for their being moved. Dr. Rumbaugh as well as Elizabeth Pugh, a long-term staff employee at the Trust, since mid-November have been denied their usual access to the Trust Laboratory in which the bonobos are housed, for reasons it-

ther, despite Dr. Rumbaugh's written request.

uing efforts for the Trust repeatedly have been blocked by certain rival forces within the Trust. Lastly, also in mid-November, the infant bonobo, Teco, was deliberately injured, specifically his 2 heels were slashed apparently with a sharp object, presumably by a Trust representative, which suggests that the welfare of the entire colony of bonobos, including Matata and Maisha, is now at grave risk.

Sue Savage-Rumbaugh has been named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine. She is shown holding Teco, a rare baby bonobo, inside the Great Ape Trust in Des Moines in April. MARY CHIND/REGISTER FILE PHOTO



# APES

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plans, and the board is adamant that the apes will not be moved," said trust spokesman Al Setka.

The apes are healthy, Setka said, adding that the trust on Dec. 2 passed a routine independent review of its animal welfare work.

Savage-Rumbaugh and the trust have attained almost rock star status in primate research circles for their work examining how bonobos, a smaller chimpanzee-like ape, communicate with humans.

Time magazine in April named her one of the world's 100 most influential people in an article that featured a photo of the scientist holding Teco. They have also been featured on "Oprah," "Anderson Cooper 360" and the BBC in recent months, giving the trust new visibility across the globe.

But the limelight has faded in recent months. Trust founder Ted Townsend announced he was pulling his financial backing of the southeast Des Moines research center, effective next month. Townsend had planned all along for his startup money to be replaced by government grants and private donations. But that hasn't happened, putting the center's future in question.

Savage-Rumbaugh and Townsend could not be reached for comment.

On Tuesday, the trust's expanded board decided Savage-Rumbaugh would continue to serve as a senior scientist at the trust. It also plans to search for a new scientific director, replacing William Fields who resigned effective Dec. 31 over differences with Savage-Rumbaugh.

Part of Tuesday's meeting was to allow Savage-Rumbaugh to defend her work after undisclosed employee complaints since 2007, when Fields took over control of the lab, said her lawyer, William Zifchak of New York, N.Y.

"She answered charges about alleged misconduct in the lab" for two hours, Zifchak said. He added that the scientist has never been told what the complaints were.

Setka said he couldn't comment about what the trust considers a personnel matter except to say, "I think the complaints were shared with her."

Teco is the offspring of one of the most famous apes in the world, Kanzi,



This photo of an alleged slash to Teco's foot was provided to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and to the Great Ape Trust's lawyer in late November. SPECIAL TO THE REGISTER

## NEW MEMBERS ON APE TRUST'S BOARD

Chairman Ken Schweller, a psychology professor at Buena Vista University, is one of several new members on an expanded Great Ape Trust board.

**OTHERS ARE:** Sociologist Paul Lasley of Iowa State University; Ramon Lim, retired, University of Iowa; ape researcher Jill Pruett of ISU; Horst D. Steklis, University of Arizona; Dr. Deborah Turner, Mercy Gynecologic Oncology in Des Moines; and Dr. Edward Wasserman, University of Iowa.

**ALSO ON THE BOARD:** Community leader Margo Blumenthal and businesswoman Connie Wimer, both of Des Moines. Trust founder Ted Townsend serves as chair emeritus and a non-voting board member.

## ONLINE

See this story at [DesMoinesRegister.com](http://DesMoinesRegister.com) to read documents filed with the court by attorneys in this case.

who also lives at the trust and is known for understanding spoken English and symbols that stand for words.

Last week, Zifchak filed documents claiming someone at the trust in November slashed both of Teco's heels so he couldn't stand upright. Savage-Rumbaugh also contended Fields had recently confirmed the bonobos would be moved to another location. She maintained that the bonobos were all at "grave risk" due to the injury to Teco.

Savage-Rumbaugh also claimed that she and her sister, Elizabeth Pugh, had been denied their usual access to the facility. Officials at the center denied that.

She also has photos of stockpiled crates typically used to transport apes.

"... Trust personnel are

preparing to sedate, cage and ship the bonobos ... to another location and to shut down the trust for all intents and purposes," Zifchak wrote in documents filed last week in the U.S. District Court for southern Iowa.

Trust lawyer Jaki Samuelson of Des Moines countered with another set of court documents disputing the allegations. "The apparent purpose of the letter's inclusion of untrue, irrelevant, and inflammatory allegations, is to generate unfounded bias and prejudice against the trust," Samuelson wrote in response to the allegations in court files.

A judge has set a hearing for Tuesday on Savage-Rumbaugh's effort to keep the bonobos in Des Moines and to ensure proper care. In an interview, Zifchak said Fields had told the new

board chairman, psychology professor Ken Schweller of Buena Vista University, that the bonobos would be shipped to another location on Thursday. Schweller blocked the move, Zifchak added. Setka denied the exchange took place.

Fields, 62, said Savage-Rumbaugh, 65, had a top-down style that conflicted with his view that a younger scientist needed to be groomed to take over the research at the trust.

"Sue really felt she should dominate the lab," Fields said. "She is Time 100. She's famous. There are always challengers working with someone who is as famous and as smart as she is," Fields said.

Savage-Rumbaugh shared photos of Teco's foot injuries with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is responsible for protecting endangered species. She also provided the agency with photos of wounds on one of Kanzi's toes that she suspects were also the result of abuse.

The trust, which opened in 2004, is home to seven bonobos and two orangutans.

Fields said any injury to Teco occurred under the watch of Savage-Rumbaugh, who has worked closely with the ape since his birth in June 2010.

"Baby Teco has been under her care," Fields said in an interview. "I don't believe the baby's feet were cut, but if they were, the baby's been under her care." The trust awaits a veterinarian's report on Teco, but earlier this month passed a routine animal-welfare review by an independent panel.

"Apes get dry feet," Fields said.

The research center does not plan to move any of the seven bonobos and two orangutans on site, Fields added. He is optimistic money will be raised to replace Townsend's support.

"My feeling is that it is going to stay open," Fields said. "People have contacted me."

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